

CHAPTER

2

Section 1

LITERATURE SELECTION *from The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Archaeologists excavated 12 cuneiform tablets containing the story of Gilgamesh, a cruel and powerful king in ancient Sumer. One of the world's oldest epics, this poem centers around Gilgamesh's heroic yet fruitless quest to achieve immortality. In this excerpt from Tablet XI, Per-napishtim, a man who was granted immortality because he saved humankind from a great flood, explains to Gilgamesh how he prepared for the deluge brought about by angry gods. As you read, think about the steps Per-napishtim takes in order to survive the flood.

All that was necessary I collected together.
On the fifth day I drew its design;
In its middle part its sides were ten gar high;
Ten gar also was the extent of its deck;
I added a front-roof to it and closed it in.
I built it in six stories,
thus making seven floors in all;
The interior of each I divided again into nine partitions.
Beaks for water within I cut out.
I selected a pole and added all that was necessary.
Three (variant, five) shar of pitch I smeared on its outside;
three shar of asphalt I used for the inside (so as to make it water-tight). . . .
The ship sank into water two thirds of its height.
With all that I possessed I filled it;
with all the silver I had I filled it;
with all the gold I had I filled it;
with living creatures of every kind I filled it.
Then I embarked also all my family and my relatives,
cattle of the field, beasts of the field, and the uprighteous people—all them I embarked.
A time had Shamash appointed, (namely):
'When the rulers of darkness send at eventide a destructive rain,
then enter into the ship and shut its door.'
This very sign came to pass, and
The rulers of darkness sent a destructive rain at eventide.
I saw the approach of the storm,
and I was afraid to witness the storm;
I entered the ship and shut the door.
I intrusted the guidance of the ship to Purur-bel, the boatman,
the great house, and the contents thereof.
As soon as early dawn appeared,
there rose up from the horizon a black cloud,
within which the weather god (Adad) thundered,
and Nabu and the king of the gods (Marduk) went before.
The destroyers passed across mountain and dale (literally, country).
Dibbara, the great, tore loose the anchor-cable (?).
There went Ninib and he caused the banks to overflow;
the Anunnaki lifted on high (their) torches,
and with the brightness thereof they illuminated the universe.
The storm brought on by Adad swept even up to the heavens,

and all light was turned into darkness. . . .
Six days and nights
The wind blew, and storm and tempest overwhelmed the country.
When the seventh day drew nigh the tempest, the storm, the battle
which they had waged like a great host began to moderate.
The sea quieted down; hurricane and storm ceased.
I looked out upon the sea and raised loud my voice,
But all mankind had turned back into clay.
Like the surrounding field had become the bed of the rivers.
I opened the air-hole and light fell upon my cheek.
Dumfounded I sank backward, and sat weeping,
while over my cheek flowed the tears.
I looked in every direction, and behold, all was sea.
Now, after twelve (days?) there rose (out of the water) a strip of land.
To Mount Nisir the ship drifted.
On Mount Nisir the boat stuck fast and it did not slip away.
The first day, the second day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast, and did not let it slip away.
The third day, the fourth day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast, and did not let it slip away.
The fifth day, the sixth day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast, and did not let it slip away.
When the seventh day drew nigh
I sent out a dove, and let her go.
The dove flew hither and thither,
but as there was no resting-place for her, she returned.
Then I sent out a swallow, and let her go.
The swallow flew hither and thither,
but as there was no resting-place for her she also returned.
Then I sent out a raven, and let her go.
The raven flew away and saw the abatement of the waters.
She settled down to feed, went away, and returned no more.
Then I let everything go out unto the four winds, and I offered a sacrifice.
I poured out a libation upon the peak of the mountain.
I placed the censers seven and seven,
and poured into them calamus, cedar-wood, and sweet-incense.
The gods smelt the savour;
yea, the gods smelt the sweet savour;
the gods gathered like flies around the sacrificer.

from Rossiter Johnson, ed., *Assyrian and Babylonian Literature* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1901), 351–357. Reprinted in Peter N. Stearns, ed., *Documents in World History, Vol. I* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), 13–15.

Research Options

1. **Comparing and Contrasting** Compare Per-napishtim's account of the flood with the Biblical account of the flood in Genesis. How are the two accounts similar? How are they different?
2. **Creating Oral Presentations** Find out more about epics like this one. What are some of the characteristics of an epic? In what other cultures around the world are epics found? Share your findings and a list of epic titles with classmates.